



University of Iowa

International Writing Program Archive of Residents' Work

10-15-2003

Sleepless Words

Alejandra Costamagna

Panel: Why I Write What I Write

Rights

Copyright © 2003 Alejandra Costamagna

Recommended Citation

Costamagna, Alejandra, "Sleepless Words" (2003). *International Writing Program Archive of Residents' Work*. 609.

https://ir.uiowa.edu/iwp_archive/609

Hosted by [Iowa Research Online](https://ir.uiowa.edu). For more information please contact: lib-ir@uiowa.edu.

Alejandra Costamagna

Sleepless Words

At the beginning of the beginning I remember my mother reading me the stories of “A thousand and one nights” at bedtime, before I went to sleep. Perhaps right then, in that innocent routine, the story telling started to nest in my head. Reading as a sacred pleasure, as an incomparable journey. Until suddenly in some moment the reading exercise began to blend with writing. First it was just some mumbling, some words related to the states of soul, maybe one or two semi-stories or a sketch of novel. In any case all of them were precarious things. I can vaguely remember one entire night that I spent in front of my typewriter typing and typing, and with a little bit more of clarity I remember that the following morning I read what I had written and I titled it: “Of what it could be and never was”. I might have been fifteen, sixteen or seventeen years old at that time, I’m not sure. It was a little naïve and teenage story, but in the end it was a story. I think the title I gave it matched perfectly well with the text: what it could be and never was. It could be a story but now it is just a memory. A fundamental memory in any case, since that text was most probably the very first step, the first piece of the jigsaw puzzle of my writer’s life. From then on the loose words began to articulate in my writings into precise stories, with characters, development of action and ending. And then in some moment I felt a flash of insight: I understood that writing was a sort of refuge. I am not sure what exactly I mean by this. I am not saying that the literature is a remedy or a crutch. Not even a therapy. It is just that the idea of interning myself with writing means for me to be safe. Safe from what? I don’t know and I don’t want to know. But this balsamic sensation has accompanied me throughout all those nights and all those days that I have passed writing.

This is, perhaps, the principal reason not to abandon this boat and to keep on writing. But of course, there are other reasons too. It is such a common question: Why do we, writers, follow this way? What strange mechanism makes us want to dedicate ourselves to this profession so little profitable, instead of managing some company or selling life insurance? I think that in almost every narrator there is a bit of masochism and schizophrenia. To create a world is something really schizophrenic. The months or years that it takes to write a novel are very schizophrenic. One lives with a latent presence of another world that nobody else can experience. Some time ago I read a phrase by Cioran – more than a phrase, a sentence – and I decided to make it mine. He says: “I write not to kill myself. Each written piece is an attempt of a failed suicide”. What a powerful reason to keep on writing, I think. But beyond this urgent motive, another important justification of writing fiction is perhaps the necessity to order up the internal chaos, authorize the delirium, give yourself permission to live in other people’s lives. Gabriel García Márquez has said that he writes because he wants to be loved more. Others have said that they do it for the pleasure of naming what hasn’t been named yet, or for the mere satisfaction of creating, or simply to give some sense to their existence. Now, when I am writing all this, I think I have found my own reason to write: I write as a way of seeing the world. I write, perhaps, to see what I can’t see in the real world with my shortsighted eyes.

And what’s interesting for me in this writing process is not only the story that is being said but also the way it is said. The “what” and the “why” of what is said. I’m interested in the poetic character of the language that accompanies the storytelling. The “staging” of the story is as relevant for me as its plot. I guess that the big challenge for each writer is to find their own voice, to meet their personal register. The style is, from this point of view, the perspective from which the writer watches the world. Yet, I don’t think that this search could be carried out through a process of full rationality. A Guatemalan writer Augusto Monterroso used to say that one never knows how to write a story. That you simply write and the day you find out how it gets dangerous, because you’ve found the formula and the whole issue loses its charm. I agree with him: a writer can never be too

conscious of his or her writing process. And if they were so, it wouldn't be appropriate to divulge it either, since the internal tools are something very intimate. Too much lucidity over the creation is not healthy. Therefore, I am not sure whether or not I would be able to define my own register, to know how exactly I write or what I am trying to say through my writing. I incline, in any case, towards the idea of not trying to use the literature as a channel to sermonize, teach, give advice or anything of this kind. The only real commitment of the writer is the one that obliges him to be faithful to his own writing, that is to say, to himself. The art cannot be at the service of any other cause that would not be the art itself.

It is a fact that as writers we live in the state of permanent alert and that we are subjected to a series of contradictions and tensions. An infinite rumor hides behind that strange silence that accompanies us, a rumor of voices that converse in our heads. But I don't believe in the existence of the muse of inspiration. I only admit that there are moments when the words come more fluently. One can help to generate this favorable atmosphere with adequate music, light, a special time of the day. Picasso used to say that he always expected to be caught by the inspiration in the middle of his work. Others went even farther with this idea. Let me reproduce a worldwide known quotation: "I only write when I am inspired. But I've managed to find a way to be inspired every day at nine in the morning". I am convinced that a working routine, even an "uninspired" one, is something essential. The talent has to go together with a certain routine. But, certainly, everyone forms his or her own routine. This thing is never going to follow any recipe. One of my favorite writing places, for example, are the airports. Travels in general. Once I go out of my own room I find myself face to face with other movements, other voices, other rooms. For me traveling is a certain way of writing: I believe that one doesn't write only when they are writing, but at any moment. One writes in one's head, and also while watching everyday life.

It hasn't happened to me with any of my books that I sat down to write deliberately about emotional fractures, the treason, the journey or the precariousness. Yet, whether we want it or not, certain topics or personalities of the protagonists just come to life all of a sudden. It has never occurred to me, for example, to write about the birds singing in the morning. Instead, what attracts me, are the delirious ones, the ones who are a little hurt, the men and the women with some errata in their lives. Perhaps I am not the one who can decipher my voice and my platform, but if I look at what I have written up to now, I can realize that my point of interest has focused unconsciously on topics like fragility of relations, exclusion, hopelessness, memory, death, the absences, guilt, human vulnerability, losses, abandonment, power. But again, going back to what I've already mentioned above, I wouldn't like to be too conscious of all this. The theory, said Bioy Casares, should be left for teachers and critics. Besides, at this point in history, perhaps all topics have already been written about and run low. And in this universal process, the only thing that is left for us, writers, to do is to create variations and to update these plots, making sure to work especially on the language we write our new versions with. Since it is the language more than anything else that will allow us to differentiate and to mark the originality of a writer.

Perhaps all I have written is a fruit of my premature and chronic insomnia, of my shortsighted look and certain obsessions of mine. I like to understand the reasons for evil. That's why I respect the characters of tragedies. I have a special interest in the rhetoric of the tragedy. The incest in Fedra, Electra's passion and fury, Macbeth's treason, the crime and the guilt in Crime and Punishment, the nausea in The Stranger. Death as an inexcusable neighbor. Not death with all that tunnel and grave aspect of it, but with the certainty of the emotional fractures and the miseries of our existence. And more than anything else, the death that nests in an author like María Luisa Bombal. Her intimacy and her passion so similar and at the same time so different from Marta Brunet. As well as the helplessness and the shadows of Uruguayan writer Juan Carlos Onetti and Mexican Juan Rulfo.

There you can find the sense of some scars in my literature. "If I have perceived certain things in this world it's because I was lucky enough not to be able to sleep", said the

same Cioran in 1973. What a coincidence of date seen with Chilean eyes, considering this was the year of the coup d'état. And what a coincidence seen with my eyes: not only Chilean and shortsighted, but also chronically sleepless. So, in this year 2003, thirty years after Cioran pronounced his word – and after so many other acts so dark and brutal as his words, I can say now that the vigil has been for me a sort of literary homeland and that if I have written certain things in my life it's because I've had the unfortunate luck of not being able to sleep.

October, 2003.